

Photo: Upper Thames River Conservation Authority



Public Involvement

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7.1 Overview

A major tenet of ecosystem management is continuous involvement of the public that is inclusive and respectful of all viewpoints and stakeholders. All the partners involved in the LaMP process have long been committed to an open, fair and significant public involvement process. The key to public support and the program's success is effective communication between the government agencies and the diverse population of the Lake Erie basin.

To keep the public apprised of progress in the LaMP, the U.S. and Canadian governments maintain a broad-based mailing list of the public interested in the LaMP progress or who are involved in other environmental activities in the Lake Erie basin. From time to time, information concerning the Lake Erie LaMP is sent to people on the mailing list to foster an active network of the public interested in Lake Erie-related environmental issues.

To provide another mechanism for public involvement, the U.S. and Canadian governments fund the Lake Erie Binational Public Forum (Forum). This diverse and active group serves many purposes ranging from developing and implementing outreach projects and initiatives to educate the general public about Lake Erie issues, to providing advice to the LaMP Work Group based on members' individual expertise and/or input from local constituents they may represent. The Forum works closely with the governmental representatives on the Lake Erie LaMP Work Group.

This chapter presents a report of current public outreach efforts, not necessarily a *complete one*. Ongoing public involvement is crucial to the success of the Lake Erie LaMP, and public participation, consultation, and comment are welcome at any time in the Lake Erie LaMP process.

7.2 Background and History

The original public involvement strategy for the LaMP was completed in April 1995. It described a three-tiered approach to involving the public. Tier I is the Lake Erie Public Forum, which is composed of members who are familiar with LaMP activities, who have the most active level of public involvement in the LaMP and who have direct contact with the Lake Erie LaMP Work Group. Tier II, the Lake Erie Network, is composed of individuals and groups who have expressed an interest in the LaMP by attending meetings and workshops or by commenting on documents, and who have requested additional information about the LaMP. They form the mailing list for the Lake Erie LaMP. Tier III is the general public, with members being unfamiliar with the Lake Erie LaMP.

The Public Involvement Subcommittee provides information to the media about ongoing binational and local LaMP activities as a way of keeping the general public informed. When actions and activities related to the Lake Erie LaMP warrant, the lead agencies issue press releases to specific media markets to facilitate media exposure. The public is also reached through the use of displays and handouts at third party meetings, such as the International Joint Commission's biennial meetings. Information is also available through the LaMP websites that are provided at the end of this chapter.

In 1995, a questionnaire was distributed assessing the knowledge and involvement level of all individuals on the mailing list. The information requested was used to develop a public involvement and communication program to build teamwork between citizens and government agencies involved in accomplishing the goals of the LaMP.

7.3 Public Involvement Activities

Ecosystem Objective Consultation

During the months of May and June 1995 the Public Involvement Subcommittee held four ecosystem objective workshops in Sandusky, Ohio; Dunkirk, New York; and in Simcoe and Leamington, Ontario. The government agencies used these workshops to solicit public input toward identifying the desired future uses, or ecosystem objectives, of the lake. These workshops served to bring members of the public together with agency representatives to direct Lake Erie LaMP efforts. These early workshops set the stage for what was to become a working group of concerned, involved residents of the Lake Erie basin who have joined together as the Lake Erie Binational Forum.

Building on the public workshops in 1995, an adaptive approach has been taken to consult with the public on the selection of a preferred ecosystem alternative. The Public Involvement Subcommittee first worked closely with a group of technical experts to create a method to communicate to the public how the LaMP's Ecosystem Objectives Subcommittee arrived at four viable scenarios (ecosystem alternatives) for Lake Erie's future state. Then, the Forum was consulted and adjustments made to assure that the explanation of the process could be simply presented and easily understood by the public. Once the Work Group selected a preferred Ecosystem Alternative, the Public Involvement Subcommittee sought the Forum's advice to develop a scripted presentation to explain how and why the Work Group chose this alternative. This presentation was used at a number of public sessions throughout the Lake Erie basin during late 2001/early 2002. These efforts have provided the Lake Erie Work Group and the Lake Erie Management Committee with valuable public input and insight.

Status Report and Update

In its support role to the Work Group, the Public Involvement Subcommittee assisted in the production and distribution of the *Status Report* in the spring of 1999. A companion piece, called *Update '99*, was written and produced as the main distribution document to inform people about the issues in, and availability of, the *Status Report*. The *Update* mailing also served as a vehicle for informing the public about the availability of the various Beneficial Use Impairment Assessment Reports that the committee is responsible for distributing. Since then, the *Update* has become a regular publication of the LaMP, appearing every second year.

Other Activities

In addition to the activities already mentioned, the Public Involvement Subcommittee was involved in a variety of outreach activities. These include the production of the following documents: 1) Fact Sheet giving an overview of Lake Erie LaMP development, printed in Fall 1995 and revised in November 1996; 2) Distribution of educational posters entitled *Lake Erie Fish and Fishery* and *Waterbirds of Lake Erie* that were developed by various United States and Canadian government agencies involved with the LaMP; and 3) Creation and distribution of bookmarks with the URL for the binational LaMP website. The Public Involvement Subcommittee also created a display to be taken to meetings to inform the public about the LaMP.

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7.4 Lake Erie Binational Public Forum

The goal of creating the Lake Erie Binational Public Forum was to have a formal group of citizens that was knowledgeable about the process and issues; was accountable to both the Management Committee and to the public; that would increase public understanding and involvement in the Lake Erie LaMP development; and that may be interested in undertaking their own activities in support of protecting and restoring Lake Erie. The Forum would be the most involved level of public participation, and would consist of individuals representing a broad range of interests and geographic areas from around the Lake Erie basin.

The Forum currently consists of approximately 30 members from across the basin that meet two to three times per year. The Forum decided to play a significant role in the LaMP process with real involvement and proactive initiatives by:

- acting as partners with governments and government agencies in goal-setting and decision-making;
- assisting the Work Group in drafting and reviewing LaMP reports and documents before they go to the Management Committee for review;
- providing advice and input to the Work Group and Management Committee in developing and implementing the LaMP;
- promoting the Forum's vision and goals for Lake Erie.

The Forum strives to increase stakeholder participation in the LaMP process by:

- representing a variety of interest groups and geographic areas;
- identifying and involving stakeholders;
- bringing personal experience and talents to the process;
- taking information from the LaMP back to the community in a form that can be understood by the public.

In addition, the Forum has always recognized the importance of their role in implementing, facilitating and/or participating in Forum-sponsored, LaMP-related activities at the local level, where appropriate.

Since October 1995 the Lake Erie Binational Public Forum has been working to fulfill these roles. Much of the Forum's early work centred around providing input to the Technical Subcommittees as each section of the LaMP 2000 and 2002 was developed. Forum members also worked to increase awareness of the LaMP within their own communities. As part of its public education goal, the Forum developed a colorful, informative 45-minute scripted presentation describing Lake Erie's past, present, and foreseeable future under topics such as human health, recreation, habitat protection and restoration, fish and wildlife, PCB and mercury reduction, RAPs, beneficial uses, land use, drinking water and exotic species. One of the incentives for preparing this presentation was to prepare the public to make informed decisions on future Lake Erie actions, particularly the selection of an ecosystem alternative and the associated management objectives. Forum members have delivered this presentation to many local groups, and received favorable feedback.

Another project of the Forum, initiated due to their interest in environmental justice issues, was the development of "A Family's Guide to Eating Fish from the Lake Erie Basin." The easy-to-read brochure presents the benefits and risks associated with eating Lake Erie fish, where not to fish, the types and sizes of fish to avoid eating, methods for preparing and cooking fish to reduce potential health risks, and contacts for more information. Working with local health departments in the Lake Erie basin, Forum members distributed fish consumption advisory information in many venues that targeted minorities or populations of at-risk consumers. Over 17,750 brochures have been distributed. The Forum's web site (www.erieforum.org/fishguide/fishguide.php) provides additional information on fish identification, local health department contacts and other handy references.

Ongoing and Upcoming Forum Activities

Through grants provided by U.S. EPA in 2003, the Lake Erie Forum has created two community-based watershed strategies. The Forum supports this approach as the members believe that the genuine involvement of community members will result in long-term and successful implementation of LaMP-recommended restoration and protection activities.

After exploring watershed needs and partnership opportunities around the Lake Erie Basin, the Forum selected the Black River watershed in Ohio and the Kettle Creek watershed in Ontario to create community-based watershed strategies and build local capacity for ongoing ecosystem stewardship. In each watershed, the Forum is working with community stakeholders to identify local environmental concerns, develop action plans to address these concerns, and ideally establish a permanent local framework to continue implementation of the strategies in each watershed.



Photo: Upper Thames River Conservation Authority

The development of these watershed strategies is based on community input, which is being gathered through an inventory of existing information and through public meetings, dialogues with stakeholders, and guidance from local partners. The strategies will:

- prioritize environmental concerns of the local watershed communities;
- identify activities to address these concerns that also complement LaMP goals in the areas of land use management, emerging issues, and chemical use reduction; and
- build local frameworks for ongoing implementation of the identified activities.

The Forum's direct interaction with the Kettle Creek and Black River communities provides a new opportunity to enhance public appreciation of the relationship between local watersheds and the Lake Erie basin ecosystem.

By facilitating an exchange of ideas and information between U.S. and Canadian watershed residents, the Forum also hopes to foster increased awareness of Lake Erie as an invaluable shared resource. To this end, the Forum hopes to broadcast the experiences gained through this project to other watersheds around Lake Erie. More information on these projects is available at www.erieforum.org/watershedprojects.htm.

7.5 Ongoing and Upcoming Activities

The Public Involvement Subcommittee is at present working on improvement of the Binational LaMP website. Placed online in 1998, the site currently has basic information about the LaMP and its organizational structure, as well as publications or products of the LaMP. We are seeking to make it a place where the public can go to answer their questions and learn about the Lake Erie LaMP.

7.6 How to Get Involved

If you would like to receive information as it becomes available, go to the binational websites:

www.on.ec.gc.ca/water/greatlakes/lakes/erie/; www.epa.gov/glnpo/lakeerie/; or www.binational.net. Or join the Lake Erie Network by contacting, Marlene O'Brien, Environment Canada, or Daniel O'Riordan, U.S. EPA.

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If you would like to become a member of the Forum, please contact Teresa Hollingsworth in Canada, or T.J. Holsen in the United States.

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